"Ring around the Rosie" Variations

Much of the following information comes from *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (ed. Iona and Peter Opie, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1951), though I did read as many of the original sources as possible.

- Earliest reported versions
- Earliest published version
- Other versions and similar rhymes

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The earliest reported versions are cited in William Wells Newell's *Games and Songs of American Children* (1883). Newell claims that this version was current in New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1790:

> Ring a ring a rosie,
> A bottle full of posie,
> All the girls in our town
> Ring for little Josie

Note the near-impossibility of interpreting this as a reference to the plague. Another version cited by Newell is especially useful, as it offers a very plausible explanation for the "We all fall down" part of the modern version:

> Round the ring of roses,
> Pots full of posies,
> The one who stoops last
> Shall tell whom she loves best

Newell comments, "At the end of the words the children suddenly stoop, and the last to get down undergoes some penalty, or has to take the place of the child in the centre, who represents the 'rosie' (rose-tree; French, rosier)."

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The first *published* version is from Kate Greenaway's *Mother Goose* (1881). This is the first time the rhyme appears in a Mother Goose collection:

> Ring-a-ring o' roses,
> A pocket full of posies,
> Hush! hush! hush! hush!
> We're all tumbled down

In the fascinating and entertaining article I cite again and again, Philip Hiscock speculates:

> Although Greenaway probably put it into print because of her knowledge of John Ruskin's obsession with a little girl he called his "Posie Rosie" and Greenaway's own obsession at that time of her life with Ruskin (that's another story....), I think she printed the poem essentially as she was hearing it being sung by little children around her in England. But her version became the standard from which most later oral versions derive. She has as the third line "Hush! hush! hush! hush!" Only very much later do we start to see the "ashes" variant, clearly a product of the evolution of the poem in the mouths of babes in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Intermediate forms are "Husha husha," and "Asha, asha," as well as others.

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Personally, I find that the wide variations in 19th and early 20th century versions of the rhyme is by itself a strong

argument against the plague interpretation, especially when you see how far these rhymes are from the version(s) we all know now. In *Shropshire Folk-Lore* (1883), G.F. Jackson records the following variation:

> Ring-a-ring o' roses,
> A pocket full of posies,
> One for Jack, and one for Jim,
> And one for little Moses--
> A-tischa! a-tischa! a-tischa!

And this ending variation:

> A curchey in, and a curchey out,
> And a curchey all together!

Alice Gomme records twelve versions in *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1898); the ones quoted below give a good idea of the variable nature of the rhyme:

> Ring a ring o' roses,
> A pocket full o' posies,
> One for me, and one for you,
> And one for little Moses--
> Hasher, Hasher, Hasher, all fall down.

> Ring, a ring o' roses,
> A pocket full o' posies;
> Up-stairs and down-stairs,
> In my lady's chamber--
> Husher! Husher! Cuckoo!

> Ring, a ring a row-o,
> See the children go-o,
> Sit below the goose-berry bush;
> Hark! they all cry Hush! hush! hush!
> Sitty down, sit down.

> Duzzy, duzzy gander,
> Sugar, milk, and candy;
> Hatch-u, hatch-u, all fall down together.

> Windy, windy weather,
> Cold and frosty weather,
> When the wind blows
> We all blow together.
> I saw Peter!
> When did you meet him?
> Merrily, cherrily
> All fall down.

Gomme also lists the following rhyme, commenting that "There is no description of the way this game is played, but it is evidently a similar game to 'Ring-a-Ring o' Roses'":

> Here we go round by ring, by ring,
> As ladies do in Yorkshire;
> A curtsey here, a curtsey there,
> A curtsey to the ground, sir.

Ranging a little farther afield: the Opies quote a similar German rhyme from Karl Simrock's *Deutsches Kinderbuch* (1848):

Ringel, Ringel Reihe!
Sind der Kinder dreie.
Sitzen auf dem Holderbusch,
Schreien alle musch musch musch:
Sitzt nieder!
Sitzt ne Frau im Ringelein,
Mit sieben kleinen Kinderlein.
Was essen gerne? Fischlein.
Was trinkens gerne? Rothen Wein.
Sitzt nieder!

Helge Moulding has provided an excellent translation of the above rhyme, complete with music and interesting annotations. Check it out.

Finally, the Opies mention that they have gathered "from oral tradition" a second verse to the rhyme:

The cows are in the meadow
Lying fast asleep,
A-tischoo! A-tischoo!
We all get up again.

Donna Weston, an alt.folklore.urban poster from Australia, has said that she learned this version as a child. Cindy Kandolf, at the other end of the world, has reported hearing the following verses at her son's playschool:

Fishes in the water,
Fishes in the sea.
We all jump up
With a one-two-three!

Cows in the meadow
Eating all the grass,
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!
Who's up last?"

The Opies also cite a similar Gaelic verse. Since I have no idea how to HTMLize diacritical marks I'll just quote their translation:

Clap! Clap! Hands,
The cow is in the garden.
Down ye go! Down ye go!
Get up now, get up!
Let's do it again.

It does seem a bit unlikely that victims of the plague would jump back up.

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